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Technology-Rich Learning

Civic Education in the Online Space

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Through online communities, diverse students can learn the skills of civil dialogue that are essential to democracy.

When I started my first teaching position, my department chair told me that there would be a cart of laptops in the back corner of the room and that I should use them every day with my students as part of a pilot program. But my classroom was not supposed to be about learning technology. Like many history teachers, I viewed my vocational calling as preparing students for their responsibilities in a democratic society. How could these laptops help with that?

If education is the bulwark of our democracy, then it follows that schools making substantial investments in technology ought to consider how those investments support schools as training grounds for citizens. As I've worked with students and with technology, I've learned that online platforms have a special role to play in creating diverse communities where students can learn to participate in civil dialogue.

The Challenge of Civic Education in a Segregated Society

Engaging in democratic discourse requires conversing with people who take different perspectives on issues or who have different backgrounds and life circumstances. Effective civic learning environments encourage students to encounter people with different ideas and beliefs (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012).

One of the greatest threats to civic education in the United States today is demographic: Our schools and neighborhoods are becoming increasingly resegregated by both race and class. The harms from these trends are raising alarms from across the political spectrum. (See, for example, Murray, 2012; and Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). How can students learn to engage in civil discourse with peers holding diverse perspectives when schools are so demographically divided? One answer involves creating online spaces where diverse students can convene and learn together.

Facing History's Digital Media Innovation Network

[Facing History and Ourselves](#) is an organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in examining racism and prejudice in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry. In 2010, Facing History launched the Digital Media Innovation Network to bring together learners and educators from around the world to

develop their media literacy, perspective-taking skills, and related civic competencies.

The network's first project involved 14 secondary schools from across the United States and around the world, from Boston, Massachusetts, and Oakland, California, to Cape Town, South Africa, and Shanghai, China. Educators and students engaged in an investigation of the 2009 documentary film *Reporter*, about Nicholas Kristof's journalism in central Africa, how he chooses his stories, and how he shares his stories with the world.

Students watched the documentary and then worked independently in their own classrooms to create short digital documentaries or other multimedia projects showcasing their lives, their communities, and their aspirations. Afterward, students came together in an online community to discuss *Reporter*, share their media projects with peers around the world, and converse about identity, international justice, and the future of media and journalism. I participated in the project as a consultant during its development and then examined the online records extensively afterward.

A close examination of this project reveals five principles that educators can follow when creating or joining online spaces to nurture civic competencies and dialogue across differences.

1. Use compelling content to explore differences.

Engaging students in dialogue across differences does not mean starting conversations with, "Hey, let's talk about how we are all different." Rather, educators should identify compelling content with broadly relevant themes and use conversations around that rich academic material to highlight how people from diverse circumstances bring their individual perspectives to complex conversations.

The documentary *Reporter* addresses two themes that resonate with students from diverse circumstances. In one sense, the film is about Nicholas Kristof's work unveiling the brutal impacts of the civil war that has caused widespread suffering and the death of more than 5 million citizens in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the same time, the film is about the challenges of telling those stories in a changing media landscape, as Kristof struggles with attracting an audience for these dismal stories in a world saturated in entertainment. Students are drawn into conversation about rights, justice, and international responsibility; and they are fascinated by the ways technology is transforming media and news for their generation.

For instance, in one online discussion, students watched a short clip from the film in which a captured African child soldier asks Kristof for forgiveness for his actions during the war and for help in returning to Rwanda. It's a richly complex moment (Why is the child soldier soliciting forgiveness from an American reporter? What might happen to him after the American reporter leaves the scene?), and it provoked a nuanced online discussion about the meaning of *forgiveness*.

Some students viewed forgiveness capaciously ("Forgiveness means to open your heart") and argued that Kristof could offer forgiveness to the child soldier as a human being. Other students argued that forgiveness can only come from those harmed. One said, "I don't think Kristof is in a position to forgive the child soldiers because he isn't one of their victims." During the conversation, the notion of forgiveness emerged as universally experienced across diverse human cultures, but in examining this complex scene, students saw how forgiveness could be interpreted differently by people in different settings.

2. Build educator relations first.

Before attempting to build safe, trusting relationships among students, educators in an online collaboration need to build collegiality among themselves. In the Digital Media Innovation Network project, Facing History worked with participating teachers to raise funds to bring teachers physically together for a week in the summer before the *Reporter* project. During this week, teachers watched and discussed *Reporter*; learned to use social media and video editing tools; and explored how new technologies were changing media, education, and individual identity.

Of course, finding the funding to bring people together physically can be difficult, and similar opportunities for building educator relationships can happen entirely online. In their book *Flattening Classrooms, Engaging Minds* (2012), Julie Lindsay and Vicki Davis, classroom educators with deep expertise in international collaboration, describe a "handshake" process they use in their [Flat Classroom projects](#) to connect individuals from different schools. In this process, educators use online tools like webinar meeting rooms to introduce themselves, discuss their classrooms, and clarify expectations around the project. Once they've gotten to know one another, the educators can then invite their students into this budding community.

3. Create spaces for sharing.

Like many collaborative projects, Facing History chose to use a [Ning network](#) as its online space. Ning allows educators to create "niche social networks," like mini-Facebook sites for particular groups with specific purposes.

Ning is only one of several good platforms for collaborative communities. [Moodle courses](#) and wikis have similar collaborative features. [MightyBell](#), a new collaborative platform from the founder of Ning, may also be of interest to educators. The specific platform chosen is not as important as making sure to design a space that encourages

students to share through both online discussion and media productions.

In the Digital Media Innovation Network project, each participating student created a profile page to share interests and hobbies. Each classroom also created a group page, where classes showcased and discussed their digital documentaries. Finally, the network facilitators created discussion forums for hosting conversations about *Reporter*, media literacy, and the themes emerging from the student documentaries.

The project organizers chose to concentrate these discussions over a one-week period, so the collaborative part of the project would take up a limited part of the school year and take advantage of the energy generated in an intensive period. Organizers posted a series of discussion questions for students to respond to, and each started with a media clip or shared text to provoke interactions.

One set of questions focused on scenes from *Reporter*, such as the one about child soldiers and forgiveness. A second set of questions focused on the student media projects. One question asked students to watch a short video from Eric Saltzman, cofounder of Creative Commons, about the power of individuals creating media, and then reflect on the experience of making their own documentaries.

4. Allow students to express themselves.

The short videos that students made provided powerful opportunities for self-expression, and they also gave peers a window into others' lives. A group of students in Shanghai created a video tour of their school and their daily academic life, and a student from Colorado commented that "it's cool how the school building looks like some buildings in America." A group of students in Oakland, California, created a video about the problems of gang violence in their community. Several other students from other urban communities commented about similar problems. But on a different note, a student from rural Colorado wrote, "I find these videos really interesting since life here in Castle Rock is a lot different than in Oakland."

One of the central themes that emerged involved students' recognition of both the foreign and the familiar in their diverse peers. In discussing *Reporter*, the students shared a common human repulsion to the terrible situation in the Congo, but they had different interpretations of the problem, the actors, and potential solutions. In reacting to one another's media projects, students found similar themes related to adolescence in their diverse stories while appreciating the wide differences in people's experiences. As one student wrote in her reflection.

The most surprising thing that I learned with this project is that there are also other students and teachers that are just like we are. They might not be in the same place as we are in and they might have totally different lives than we do, but we are all making a difference in our classes that can hopefully move the world. (Romer & Mingo, 2011)

Other students reflected on the value of being exposed to different ideas that could influence their own thinking. As one student stated, "My opinions aren't always all that there will ever be." This kind of perspective taking, of recognizing the shared humanity of diverse peoples, is at the heart of developing civic and participatory skills. One student noted that seeing other people's passion inspired her to get more involved in her community, demonstrating the potential for projects like this one to spark a more long-term commitment to civic participation.

5. Intentionally solicit diverse participants.

In recruiting and selecting participants for the project, Facing History deliberately sought out teachers working in diverse settings: in the United States and abroad, in private and public schools, in urban and suburban settings. Teachers selected for the project needed access to networked technology for their classrooms; enthusiasm for the work (enthusiasm to learn being more important than established expertise); and a willingness to commit to the project.

Many networks exist for helping teachers connect with other like-minded teachers for online collaborations, especially for building partnerships across the globe. [iEARN](#) is one of the oldest and largest networks sponsoring international collaborative projects. [The Flat Classroom Project](#) accepts applications for collaborations several times a year. [The annual Global Education Conference](#) is a free virtual conference through which educators can learn about ongoing projects and connect with one another.

For teachers looking to start or join projects, the most important first step is networking with other educators. Face-to-face conferences; informal gatherings like [Edcamps](#); and social media spaces like [Twitter's #edchat community](#) are all good places to meet potential partners. Organizations like [ASCD](#), the [National Council for the Social Studies](#), and the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) all have online communities that can help you identify teachers working in diverse circumstances throughout the United States.

Online Networks in a Democratic Society

In too many schools, opportunities to collaborate with other schools remain as add-ons that are restricted to students in a few elective classes. This pattern is a shame because the work done in these online spaces is vital to the civic mission of schools.

As demographic forces beyond the control of teachers increasingly lead to homogenous classrooms, social media platforms create spaces where students can learn to understand and engage with people who are different from themselves. From that perspective, online collaborative projects are not just a way to prepare students for a networked future; they are vital to schooling in a democratic society.

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